

A handbook for SACRE members



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Introduction

Joining your local SACRE

This is a handbook for all SACRE members, new or experienced.

It is designed to:

- help SACREs become more effective through the informed participation of their members
- clarify the context and work of a SACRE
- be a point of reference

As a member of a SACRE you are serving your community and the Local Authority (LA) in an important way. Whichever community or group you represent, your active participation makes a valuable contribution to the quality of religious education (RE) and collective worship (CW) that pupils experience in schools. Your work also makes an important contribution to community relations locally, thereby building stronger communities.

What is this handbook for?

The handbook is designed as a point of reference for all SACRE members, and to be of interest and support, particularly to those who are new to the role, by:

- explaining the work of a SACRE and the roles of its individual members
- helping you understand the nature and purpose of religious education and collective worship
- explaining what the law says about religious education and collective worship
- helping you work within your SACRE to support and encourage local schools to ensure high standards in religious education and collective worship

It is also designed to help SACREs become more effective through the informed participation of their members.



SECTION 1: SACRE duties, roles and responsibilities

What is a SACRE?

SACRE stands for **Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education**.

Why is there a SACRE?

A SACRE is a statutory council appointed by, but separate from, a local authority with responsibility for education.

SACRE's main statutory function is to advise the local authority on matters related to religious education and collective worship in maintained schools. Since 1988, every LA must have a SACRE by law. SACREs are funded through the Central Schools Services Block (CSSB). The LA has a legal requirement to take responsibility for making sure SACRE is well supported and that SACRE's work connects to schools and their curriculum. There is no other body like it; SACRE is unique.

SACRE's remit does not extend to voluntary aided schools with regard to RE or CW, or voluntary controlled schools with regard to CW. Academies are covered by their funding agreement with government and their relationship to the local authority differs from maintained schools. Many of these schools and academies value the work of their local SACRE and SACRE's advice and support. Working with the LA, SACRE has a responsibility to monitor the provision of RE and CW in all schools, including academies, to ensure that they are meeting their statutory duty.



What does a SACRE do?

The law says that RE must be taught in all maintained schools and a SACRE's role is to advise its local authority on what needs to be done to improve religious education and collective worship for those schools in its area. This is because RE is not part of the National Curriculum (NC); it is locally determined. Through the SACRE, local communities and teachers can influence and support what pupils are learning in RE.

The following is adapted from the Non-Statutory Guidance (DCSF, 2010):

Religious Education

A SACRE must:

- advise the LA on RE in accordance with the Agreed Syllabus
- publish an annual report on its work and on actions taken by its representative Groups, specifying matters on which it has advised the LA
- email a copy of the annual report to the Secretary of State; annual reports have been analysed by the DfE and NASACRE since September 2021
- meet in public, unless confidential information is to be disclosed
- make minutes of meetings available for public inspection.

A SACRE should:

- monitor the provision and quality of RE taught according to the Agreed Syllabus, together with the overall effectiveness of the syllabus
- provide advice and support on the effective teaching of RE in accordance with the locally Agreed Syllabus
- in partnership with the LA, consider whether any changes need to be made to the Agreed Syllabus
- offer advice to the LA, and through the LA to schools, concerning the way an existing Agreed Syllabus can be interpreted to fit with a broad, balanced, coherent and cohesive curriculum.

A SACRE may:

- require the LA to review the Agreed Syllabus; if a vote is taken on this matter, SACRE Group D (the LA) is not entitled to cast a vote; a majority decision by the three other committees is sufficient
- decide to advise the LA on matters related to its functions; equally, an LA may decide to refer matters to the SACRE
- co-opt members who are not members of any of the four SACRE Groups; such co-opted members may provide educational expertise, young people's views or religious and non-religious views, reflecting a diverse multicultural society.

Collective Worship

A SACRE must:

- Advise the LA on matters relating to collective worship, either in response to a referral from the LA, or as the SACRE sees fit
- consider applications from a headteacher that the school be allowed to modify the 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' requirement for collective worship. This is known as a determination.

What else can a SACRE do?

SACRE's role is to support good RE and collective worship within its schools by:

- giving advice on ways of teaching the Agreed Syllabus, including the choice of teaching materials
- monitoring schools' provision for RE and collective worship as well as pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC)
- advising the LA on the provision of RE training for teachers
- considering complaints referred by the LA about the provision and delivery of religious education or collective worship.

Assessment

In order to offer advice, SACRE should monitor school approaches to assessing pupils' progress in RE and review the uptake and standards achieved in external religious studies examinations.

Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development

SACRE should be aware of the contribution that RE and CW can make to pupils' personal development including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Additionally, members of Groups A and B may support pupils' awareness of religious beliefs and their influence on the formation of pupils' attitudes and values.

The most effective SACREs may also:

- monitor good practice in the delivery of the Agreed Syllabus in a range of ways, taking note of any difficulties
- disseminate good practice in the teaching of RE
- review provision for in-service training and development
- receive school inspection reports, in whole or part



SECTION 2: SACRE membership, composition, Group representation, roles and responsibilities

Who attends the SACRE meetings?

SACRE represents a balance of all the interests of the local community. It may comprise elected councillors, representatives of faith and belief communities and members of the education community, including teachers and headteachers, with others representing governors, teacher training, universities and local academies.

SACRE has two types of members - those appointed by the local authority and those co-opted by SACRE itself. When the LA appoints a member, they will be in one of four Groups (see below).

Co-opted members do not belong to a specific Group and therefore have no vote, but they can speak at meetings.

How is the membership of a SACRE decided?

The structure of the SACRE is defined by law; the specific numbers of members in each Group will usually be set out in the individual SACRE's constitution, based on the most recent census data. These are frequently decided by the LA, usually in consultation with the SACRE, depending on local circumstances and in collaboration with the organisations and communities represented.

The composition of a SACRE

Group A	Christian denominations and such other religions and religious denominations as, in the authority's opinion, will appropriately reflect the principal religious traditions in the area
Group B	The Church of England
Group C	Teacher and headteacher associations and others representing education interests. Some SACREs ensure representation from different phases and types of schools such as SEND, academies and Free Schools.
Group D	The Local Authority

When a formal vote is required, each of these Groups has equal voting rights; there is one vote per Group; each group makes its own arrangements for how to decide, most commonly through internal discussion and then a majority vote.

Who are the representatives?

Group A

Group A is made up of representatives of Christian denominations other than the Church of England. It may include, for example, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, the Free Churches (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, United Reformed Church, Pentecostal, The Salvation Army) and The Society of Friends. It also has representatives from other faiths in the area, e.g. Buddhists, Baha'is, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs. If there is no local community of a principal religion, it is common practice to seek representation so that local SACRE meaningfully reflects the principal religions in Great Britain, consistent with the efficient discharge of SACRE's functions.

Following the judgement by Justice Constable on the *Bowen v Kent CC* case, [Bowen, R \(On the Application Of\) v Kent County Council \[2023\] EWHC 1261 \(Admin\) \(26 May 2023\)](#) in order to comply with human rights legislation, the composition of Group A should be read so as to include the representation of non-religious belief systems.

By law, the make-up of Group A will vary from SACRE to SACRE, as it should reflect the diversity of the various faith and belief communities in the locality.

Group B

Group B is made up of representatives nominated by the local Church of England diocese, or dioceses, within the local authority area.

Group C

The members of Group C are usually representatives of professional teacher/headteacher associations. The local authority decides which associations will be invited to be represented, and they will usually approach the teacher unions, but local associations of RE teachers may also be asked to provide a representative. Sometimes a local teacher training establishment is invited to make a nomination, and/or someone representing the interests of local academies.

Group D

It is the local authority's responsibility to provide their own representatives for this committee. They are usually elected members or other political nominees, together with a representative of Children's Services. It is good practice for the LA to have all parties and viewpoints from across the political spectrum represented on the SACRE. In some LAs, a representative of school governors may also be on Group D.

Co-options

SACREs may co-opt other members who have particular expertise or represent a small local faith or belief community. Members can be co-opted for a specific time and purpose, or for more general contribution to SACRE's work, but as they are not in a Group, they do not have voting rights.

What will be my responsibilities as a SACRE member?

As a SACRE member you should be committed to the importance of religious education and to respecting the views of others. You have a responsibility to promote children's learning in RE and the quality of their CW, and to work for the highest standards in both.

You should represent the perspective of your community or sponsoring body in the work of SACRE and communicate the interests and the work of the SACRE back to them. You should be able to network effectively to contribute to the relationship and dialogue between the SACRE, your sponsoring body, the local community and schools. The specific opportunities you have will also depend on the organisation you represent. How you present yourself and work with others will be seen as reflecting on the values and ethos of the body you have been appointed to represent.

This is a unique opportunity to serve your local community and influence the attitudes of children and young people more widely than in a purely academic context. Social cohesion is recognised as being important to our society, and young people as present and future citizens of the UK. The effective SACRE is a model of social cohesion in which every member is heard and respected, even when there are many different positions or opinions on issues under discussion. In an effective SACRE, potential conflict is managed harmoniously. By the same token, SACREs have the potential to promote social cohesion more widely, in schools and within their local community.

Do we all have the same responsibilities?

Everyone shares the responsibility to put children's learning before personal interest.

Members of **Groups A and B**, each of whom represents a faith community within the locality:

- should present and foster a realistic image of their religion or belief, so that negative stereotyping is avoided. They must also make clear any grounds on which they may differ from each other, whilst showing respect for each other's viewpoints, since such convictions and mutual understanding both lie at the heart of effective classroom RE
- can create opportunities within SACRE meetings to raise awareness of sensitive and controversial issues in teaching RE to the children of their faith community, and also in the presentation of their faith and religious tradition within religious education, always taking an educational approach
- should be mindful of any difficulties local schools are facing, support their best endeavours, and where necessary, act as a link between schools and the faith communities
- should be aware of other local minority faith communities not represented; some SACREs address this and co-opt representatives from these communities
- consult with their communities on matters of particular importance to SACRE's work.

Members of **Group C**, representing teacher associations and education:

- should have a real and positive interest in RE in primary, secondary or special schools
- should ensure that the needs of schools and teachers are considered by the SACRE in their discussions
- should provide the SACRE with information about the context in which RE is taught in the schools in the local authority
- should ensure that the bodies they represent are informed about the work of the SACRE and about RE in local schools
- should create opportunities for other teachers to learn more about the work of the SACRE and give them the opportunity to have their views expressed at SACRE meetings
- should consult their colleagues on matters of particular importance to SACRE's work
- should bring a 'public' dimension to the debate about RE provision and support.

Members of **Group D**, representing the local authority:

- bring the concerns of the electorate for consideration
- bring to the meeting the breadth of educational issues and concerns that elected members are wrestling with, and place the role of RE within them
- can be supporters of RE within the various committees and structures of the LA
- can give political support to enable locally determined RE to flourish within the LA
- can appreciate the issues raised by a multi-faith, multicultural society and reflect these issues in support of RE in the relevant council structures
- can particularly support the efforts of the SACRE to be effective, through publicising its work with fellow elected members and officers of the LA, ensuring it is taken seriously and is appropriately funded and supported by advisers.



SECTION 3: Religious education and collective worship

Type of school	Religious education	Collective worship
Community/maintained schools	is taught according to the local authority's agreed syllabus and comes within SACRE's remit.	follows the 1996 Education Act and is 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.
Voluntary controlled (VC) schools	is taught according to the local authority's agreed syllabus and comes within SACRE's remit. ²	reflects the religious character of the school.
Voluntary aided (VA) schools	is determined by the governors in accordance with the trust deed and reflects the religious character of the school. ¹	reflects the religious character of the school.
Foundation schools without a religious character	is taught according to the local authority's agreed syllabus.	follows the 1996 Education Act and is 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.
Foundation schools with a religious character	is taught according to the local authority's agreed syllabus. ²	reflects the religious character of the school.
Trust schools	is taught according to the local authority's agreed syllabus.	follows the 1996 Education Act and is 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.
Academies without a religious character	must be part of the curriculum but is taught according to the school's funding agreement.	must be offered to every pupil every day, but provision is determined by the school's funding agreement.
Academies with a religious character	is defined by the funding agreement and is usually that same as the former (VA/VC) status of the school.	reflects the religious character of the school.

What should I know about religious education?

Religious education is a statutory element of the school curriculum. Although it is not part of the National Curriculum, it forms part of the Basic Curriculum, which along with the NC, forms the statutory school curriculum; it is therefore part of every pupil's entitlement.

Religious Education does not seek to nurture religious faith, rather it provokes challenging questions about meaning and purpose, the nature of reality and the self, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human.

What is a locally Agreed Syllabus for RE?

The locally Agreed Syllabus is the statutory document for RE in maintained schools in the local authority. It sets out what should be taught to pupils in all key stages and the standards expected at the end of each key stage. It is produced by an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC).

The Agreed Syllabus must be reviewed every five years. If, at some other time, a majority of the SACRE Groups (excluding Group D) asks the LA in writing to reconsider its Agreed Syllabus, it must convene an Agreed Syllabus Conference for that purpose. (Education Act 1996, Chapter III)

What is the Agreed Syllabus Conference?

An Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) is a statutory body brought together to produce an Agreed Syllabus for RE. It is a separate legal entity from a SACRE.

An ASC:

- has the same structure as the SACRE, but Groups are referred to as Committees
- can be made up of some SACRE members but need not be so; there is no provision for co-opted members

In some LAs, the Chair of the ASC is appointed by the LA, whilst in others, the ASC chooses its own Chair. The LA's responsibility to convene the ASC includes the duty to provide funds and support for its work.

If the ASC cannot agree a syllabus, the Secretary of State appoints a Conference to ensure there is a syllabus for that LA.



What should I know about collective worship?

Schools are required to provide a daily act of collective worship, the majority of which would be 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'. This means that it 'reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief without being distinctive of any particular Christian denomination'. It does not mean it has to be exclusively Christian. It must, however, be educational and appropriate to the age, aptitude and family background of pupils. When done well, collective worship provides an excellent opportunity for schools to contribute to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development and to the ethos of the school community.

In relation to collective worship, SACREs should:

- receive inspection reports, noting any references to the quality of collective worship in the context of pupils' SMSC development, including Fundamental British Values
- monitor the quality of provision where possible and share good practice
- offer advice to headteachers and governing bodies, including where there may be difficulties.

Many SACREs produce their own advice and guidance on collective worship. The SACRE may also provide training for teachers, headteachers and governors or other people who are involved in leading collective worship in school as visitors.

What should I know about determinations?

Schools apply for a determination if they feel that the proportion of collective worship which reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief as required by law is not appropriate for their pupils. That does not mean they do not have to offer collective worship at all.

The determination procedure allows this requirement to be lifted in respect of some or all pupils in a school. They are called determinations because SACRE 'determines' whether the case being made in an application to modify the law for all, or a group of, pupils in a school is appropriate.

Applications for determinations are made to the SACRE by the headteacher of any community school after consultation with the school's governing body.

Determinations are only possible for schools that do not have a religious character. Many SACREs have an agreed process to enable such an application to take place. The SACRE should review each determination every five years.

Parent/Carer rights

Parents/carers have the right, on conscience grounds, to withdraw their children, in any school, from all or any part of RE and collective worship. Sixth form students aged 18 may withdraw themselves from collective worship.

Parents also have certain rights regarding the provision of RE in different categories of school. However, these rights are rarely exercised.

- In Aided schools*, parents can opt for their children to receive Agreed Syllabus RE
- In these schools, parents can opt for their children to receive RE in accordance with the religious character of the school

In community schools and foundation schools without a religious character, where parents ask to withdraw their child from religious education, alternative RE provision for that child can be made elsewhere by the parents, provided there are no additional costs to the school and the child does not miss any of the taught sessions of the school curriculum.

The school continues to have responsibility for ensuring any pupil withdrawn from RE is supervised and safe. (*See RE and collective worship in school table, page 10.)

Religious teaching from within the faith community

SACRE members should be aware that some pupils will be formally receiving teaching about their own religion from their parents or through attendance at classes sponsored by their place of worship. The purpose of this teaching will usually differ from that of the religious education delivered in their schools, and the approach to learning may differ significantly.

There is a clear distinction between this religious nurture, which is the responsibility of the family and community, and religious education, by nature an open and explorative activity, appropriate in schools. It is important that the home and community background of the pupils is recognised and respected in school, but also that the educational approach is understood to promote reflection on faith and belief stances. SACREs might consider how they will support schools and communities in understanding each other's different roles to ensure that any potential tension is creative rather than threatening.

SECTION 4: Local Authorities and SACREs

What are the local authority's responsibilities regarding its SACRE?

Every local authority has a duty to ensure that:

- there is a SACRE
- all four Groups are represented
- there is an Agreed Syllabus, reviewed every five years
- support is in place to enable SACRE to fulfil its duties, which includes providing appropriate clerking and specialist advice
- it takes note of, and responds to, advice from the SACRE.

Does SACRE's remit cover all schools in the local authority?

No, SACRE's responsibility covers the majority of schools, but there are some exceptions, depending entirely on the category of a school. Some schools have a specific religious character and these are either voluntary aided (VA) i.e. voluntary schools, aided by the LA but controlled by a religious body, or voluntary controlled (VC) i.e. voluntary schools, controlled by the local authority and aided by a religious body. The difference from SACRE's perspective is crucial. There are also some non-religious schools for which SACRE has no responsibility, including new academies, although many SACREs engage and work with academies, including the development and provision of the Agreed Syllabus. (*See RE and collective worship in school table, page 11.*) SACREs have a responsibility to monitor provision in all schools to ensure that they are fulfilling their statutory duty to provide RE for all registered pupils.



How does a SACRE make its work known?

Local Authorities

The relationship between SACREs, local authority officers and elected members is important. SACRE's proceedings need to be reported to the appropriate LA committee where decisions are made about the education service and schools. The agreed minutes of meetings should be brought to their attention and made public, and the SACRE's Annual Report should be formally presented. Where such a person is in post, the local RE adviser is a vital source of professional guidance, support, advice, information, and practical expertise for the SACRE. His or her attendance at SACRE meetings is essential.

Local authority representatives on SACRE also have a role in ensuring SACRE's work, and any issues of concern raised are brought to the attention of the relevant sections of the council and the local authority.

Schools

Many schools seem unaware of the responsibilities and activities of their local SACRE. The specialist expertise on different faiths represented on a SACRE may be a source of advice to schools, being reliably representative of their local community. Some SACREs also hold their meetings in schools where they can meet and hear from pupils and teachers working there with a responsibility for RE or CW.

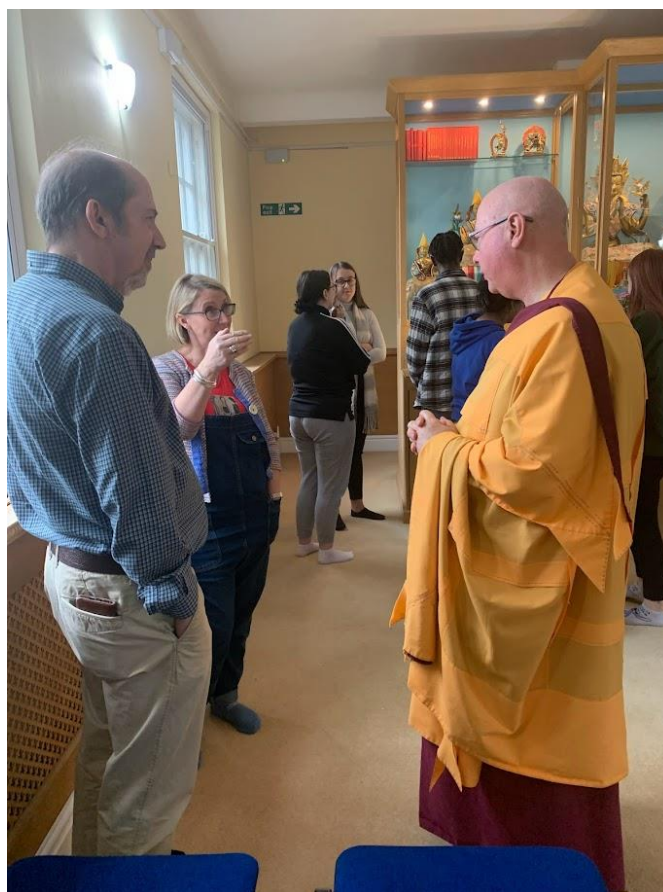
Faith communities

Sometimes SACREs hold meetings in local places of worship to build relationships. Individual faith community members have a responsibility to inform those they represent about the activities of the SACRE. They should also be available to receive the views of their community to feed into SACRE discussions.

It is good practice to send the SACRE annual report to the faith communities represented on the SACRE. It should also routinely be sent to local libraries and be on the agenda of the local Inter Faith Group or Faith Forum.

General public

SACRE meetings are by law open to the general public and notice of all meetings should be published, usually on the council's website. In the event of anyone requesting them, relevant documents should be made available.



SECTION 5: FAQs for new SACRE members

How often does a SACRE meet?

There is no hard and fast rule about the number of meetings a SACRE should hold each year. It must, however, meet a sufficient number of times to fulfil its statutory duties. Almost all SACREs meet at least three times a year, i.e. once a term, and some are more active and meet more frequently. Sometimes working parties made up of SACRE members meet between full meetings to move forward specific areas of the SACRE's work.

Will I be asked to chair the meeting?

The law does not state how the Chair of SACRE should be appointed. The local authority can appoint the Chair or it can allow the SACRE to elect the Chair from amongst its members. As a SACRE member, you could therefore be appointed Chair of SACRE, but not against your will!

Will I be asked to take the minutes?

The local authority's responsibility to set up a SACRE carries with it a duty to fund and ensure it can function efficiently. This means the LA should provide a clerk for the SACRE who will agenda and minute each meeting. The clerk is usually the point of contact for SACRE matters within the local authority.

If I'm not there, will it matter?

When you are unable to be present, it may be that no one else will be able to provide your special knowledge or make connections to your specialist networks to support the SACRE's work.

SACRE has a right to expect a level of commitment from its members, reflected in regular attendance at meetings. When this is not possible, it is common practice and polite convention to send apologies for absence.

Some SACREs invite members from whom they have not received apologies on three consecutive occasions to confirm their interest in continuing to serve. Some SACREs allow members who cannot attend to send someone else on their behalf. Some SACREs hold hybrid meetings, where members who cannot attend in person can do so virtually. Remember that when you are unable to be present, no one else will be able to provide your special knowledge in any discussions or make connections to your specialist networks to support SACRE's work.

Rules about quoracy are usually laid down in an individual SACRE's constitution, but generally:

- each Group should have at least one member present at each meeting
- decisions cannot be made unless there is at least one person present to cast the Group's single vote
- co-opted members do not have a vote.

This applies particularly to meetings at which decisions are to be made.

APPENDIX: A good SACRE member ...

In pairs or small groups, consider how you would rank each of these characteristics of a good SACRE member, the most important first and the least significant last, discarding any that you think are inappropriate.

... listens to all views and ideas.	
... seeks to understand the views of other members, rather than promoting his/her own agenda.	
... is willing to contribute to discussions.	
... understands his or her role as a SACRE member.	
... thinks his or her point of view is important.	
... is committed to SACRE meetings.	
... is well informed about the work of their SACRE.	
... works harmoniously with other members.	
... has time to spend in school.	
... listens more than he or she speaks.	
... wants to build good partnerships with other SACRE members.	
... is keen and able to communicate with teachers and pupils.	
... takes an active participative approach, following lines of enquiry of personal interest.	
... supports and encourages local schools to aspire to high standards in RE and collective worship.	
... is prepared to bring issues to SACRE from their faith, belief or other sponsoring group.	
... cares about pupils' learning and their personal development.	
... is confident about everything to do with RE and CW in schools.	
... takes an active part in meetings.	
... is able to offer relevant experiences.	
... understands and believes in the positive value of RE and CW in schools.	
... keeps in touch with national issues in RE and CW.	
... knows about local faith communities.	
... has the ability and confidence to question perceived wisdom.	
... takes an interest in key RE and CW issues facing schools.	
... works to create a bridge between SACRE, local communities and local schools.	

APPENDIX: An effective SACRE ...

In pairs or small groups, consider how you would rank each of these characteristics of an effective SACRE, the most important first and the least significant last, discarding any that you think are inappropriate.

... plans and evaluates its work rigorously.	
... is representative of the variety of beliefs within the local community.	
... understands the difference between RE and religious indoctrination and focuses its work appropriately.	
... promotes inclusivity and social cohesion.	
... is well attended by committee members and consistently quorate.	
... is well chaired.	
... is one that works strategically.	
... is able to secure adequate funding from its LA.	
... has a good partnership with the LA.	
... is one that uses its resources wisely and efficiently.	
... has professional RE advice and support from the LA.	
... demonstrates a hands-on approach with schools and their staff.	
... is committed to making RE relevant, interesting, appropriate, exciting and thoroughly enjoyable.	
... is one where there is good listening and communicating.	
... gives information in plain English.	
... has a committed membership.	
... is able to offer schools advice and support through well informed members.	
... is generally aware of issues related to pupils' progress in RE.	
... is representative of the interests of the local community.	
... constantly seeks to self-evaluate and improve.	
... is proactive not passive.	
... provides or secures relevant training for RE teachers.	
... monitors schools' RE provision and offers them support in self-review.	
... works to develop strong partnerships between SACRE members in order to model the cohesion they believe that should develop in their community.	
... advises its LA on RE, CW and the promotion of pupils' SMSC development and social cohesion.	
... encourages and values the contribution of all members and ensures they know they're appreciated.	
... responds readily to national or international issues relating to its sphere of interest.	